

Book Review: The Proust of Weequahic: Philip Roth in Search of Lost Newark

Philip Roth, The Plot Against America, Houghton Mifflin, 2004

Turned wrong way round, the relentless unforeseen was what we children studied as "History," harmless history, where everything unexpected in its own time is chronicled on the page as inevitable. The terror of the unforeseen is what the science of history hides, turning disaster into an epic.

Philip Roth, The Plot Against America

The soothsayers who found out from time what it had in store certainly did not experience time as either homogeneous or empty. Anyone who keeps this in mind will perhaps get an idea of how past times were experienced in remembrance – namely, in just the same way. We know that the Jews were prohibited from investigating the future. The Torah and the prayers instruct them in remembrance, however. This stripped the future of its magic, to which all those succumb who turn to the soothsayers for enlightenment. This does not imply, however, that for the Jews the future turned into homogeneous, empty time. For every second of time was the strait gate through which the Messiah might enter.

Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History"

"Because what's history?" he asked rhetorically when he was in his expansive dinnertime instructional mode. "History is everything that happens everywhere. Even here in Newark. Even here on Summit Avenue. Even what happens in this house to an ordinary man – that'll be history too someday."

Philip Roth, The Plot Against America

In this sense, if for no other, history becomes what it had never been before – the faith of fallen Jews.

Yosef Hayyim Yerushalmi, Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory

From the time of the publication of his first major work *Goodbye Columbus* in 1959 until the traumatic caesura of *Portnoy's Complaint* in 1967, Philip Roth was the Jew that Jews loved to hate. His writing sought to skewer and disfigure the public image of the Ashkenazi Jews by looking deeply into the collective hypocrisies and misdeeds of his kinsmen. The emerging Jewish bourgeoisie, coming out of the horrors of the Holocaust and of American ethnic anti-Semitism, saw itself in emancipated terms and began to let loose. The accumulation of wealth and power, presaged in the fiction of Roth and his predecessor Saul Bellow, led to a freedom and a decadence – and a subsequent Puritanism.

Roth told tales of Jewish sexual obsession and dysfunction; men and boys whose eyes were wandering and women whose materialism and vanity led those men to find the fulfillment of their sexuality and their machismo elsewhere. Roth told a story that, at least this is the way that Jews saw it, portrayed his people as a nefarious and immoral bunch – the freedoms of assimilation had come to the Jews and they reveled in it.

For his sins Roth was punished and vilified – while at the same time becoming a best-selling author and a household name in American culture – a culture that prided itself on not reading books. Philip Roth was a literary celebrity whose claim to fame was as a self-hating Jew and a peddler of smut.

A funny thing happened at the end of the 1970's: Roth abandoned his previous literary hijinks and his sexual preoccupations – not that they were abandoned forever, just re-channeled – and wrote a series of novels, beginning with *The Ghost Writer* in 1979, that introduced his readers to Nathan Zuckerman, a Roth stand-in, who took on the role of a Jewish scribe, a chronicler who began to excavate the modern history of the Jewish people. Roth, like Kafka and Freud, began to pontificate on who the Jews were, what made them tick, in order to try and explain why it was that his *Portnoy* so deeply affected these people.

In order to do this Roth developed a literary strategy that he has consistently deployed since then: On the one hand Roth has re-imagined Jewish history, taking on Anne Frank, the Holocaust, Zionism and the rest and going at it like a contemporary Jonathan Swift or Rabelais. There was nothing that Roth would not re-frame and re-imagine in his fiction. And while re-creating Jewish history from variant perspectives, Roth began to delve into his own personal biography and his own family history, writing stories of Newark and of his own past.

Thus the city of Newark, Roth's birthplace, appears in many of his later novels. Roth struggles to understand who he is and what has happened in the years since he was born. A good deal of history and change has taken place and Roth has not shied away from examining that history in his prose.

A couple of years ago Roth was given a special award at the National Book Awards ceremony in New York. In his acceptance speech he listed his literary influences and rather than naming Rashi and Kafka, he insisted that his literature was modeled after Sinclair Lewis, Frank Norris and Stephen Crane – Roth asserted in no uncertain terms that he was an American writer whose Judaism was incidental to his work. Freud too insisted that his writings on psychoanalysis were European and not Jewish in nature. This literary swerve is an Oedipal move that attempts to universalize a writer's work and lift it out of the realm of the parochial.

But it is worth taking Roth at his word.

America has become a central part of Roth's oeuvre at this point in his career. His new book, *The Plot Against America*, is a historical reconstruction and re-imagining of the 1940's based on a fictionalized portrayal of a Charles Lindbergh presidential victory in 1940 – leaving the FDR liberals and anti-fascists to fend for themselves. The novel is thus of a piece with the massive reclamation project that Roth has been constructing since *The Ghost Writer*; he sees himself as a journalist who is trying to report the story of the American Jews in the 20th century through his fiction.

In his books from the *Zuckerman Unbound* trilogy to *American Pastoral*, *I Married a Communist* and *The Human Stain*, Roth has tried to assess the Jewish condition in America from a number of different vantage points: He has looked at the grand dreams of assimilation, the idea that Jews could stop being Jews and become Americans; he has looked at Jewish privilege and the Jewish slide into Conservatism and reactionary beliefs through an examination of how the Holy Trinity of American Jews – the Holocaust, Zionism and Anti-Semitism – functions in the lives of Jews.

The Plot Against America, a major Roth work which has surprisingly become his most commercially successful novel since *Portnoy's Complaint*, is a story of historical fantasy that works in an allegorical fashion to communicate some hitherto unexamined truths about the modern Jewish condition.

The story of the book is quite simple and distressing. The Roth family in Newark is an average Jewish clan trying to survive and thrive on the mean streets of post-Depression America. At a very crucial moment in this country's history, the crossroads of the Second World War, the candidacy of FDR fails and Charles Lindbergh, a famous aviator and Anti-Semite, is elected president.

The tightly knit Jewish community of Newark is shaken to its very core. Divisions in the Jewish community begin to manifest themselves. The emergence of overt racism against the Jews develops. An agency of American Absorption is created in order to denature the Jews and assimilate them into Gentile society. The Lindbergh administration remains neutral in the War and diplomatic alliances are made with Hitler.

Roth places his characters into difficult situations and shows how they handle the new realities. There is a segment of the Jewish community, led by Rabbi Alvin Bengelsdorf and Philip's aunt Evelyn, who are buoyed by the Lindbergh victory and become an active part of the Jewish reconstruction effort. Indeed, Aunt Evelyn encourages Philip's brother Sandy to go to Kentucky to work on a farm as part of the assimilation project.

Rabbi Bengelsdorf becomes a fixture in the Lindbergh White House and functions as the administration's liaison to the Jewish community – many of whom go along with the new schemes.

In a very strange turn of events, Roth portrays the Jews as developing a love for Lindbergh as they gradually turn away from their liberal and progressive ideals and adopt

the reactionary nativist Conservatism of the Christian majority. The strategy backfires as the violence against the Jews increases in the wake of the radio personality and gossip monger Walter Winchell's speeches against Lindbergh.

Roth goes back to history and reverses that history in a manner that many of the book's readers wish to see as a prophetic allegory. It is deeply fascinating to see the Jewish neo-Conservatives now appropriating Roth as a fellow traveler. The same Roth who these same Jews excoriated in the 60's and 70's has now become – for them – a man who has seen the error of his ways. The allegory of *The Plot Against America* is seen by these Jews as a harbinger of the current worries of the Jews who see Anti-Semitism around every corner and who have developed an insular and aggressive sense of self that has closed itself from the world – one can see this on the pages of Commentary magazine as easily as looking at Eliot Abrams, Richard Perle and the rest of the Jewish Neo-Cons.

Is such an allegorical reading the preferred reading of the novel? Has Roth completely turned on us and become a member of the reactionary Jewish establishment?

In her book on Walter Benjamin, Emmanuel Levinas and Gershom Scholem, *Fragments of Redemption*, Susan Handelman discusses Benjamin's view of allegory:

Benjamin saw allegory as the form in which the sharp pains of time, history and finitude were recognized – and as the key to understanding modernism, its history and aesthetics. In one sense, “modernism” is a “negative” strain of romanticism, a recognition of the irremediable gaps between mind and nature, and the underside of the “imagination” where prophetic vision becomes destructive apocalypse... Allegory preserved the gap, the disparity, the difference between this world and redemption. History was the site of ruin, and only out of an “unfaithful leap” or moment of reversal comes redemption.

How then are we to analyze the role and function of allegory in a literary work?

According to Handelman's reading of Benjamin the underlying goal of an allegorical reading is to read the present in terms of the past in a way that restores to the present a sense of plenitude; the point of literary allegory is to see the present as lacking and to summon up the past to right the wrongs of the present.

The idea that Roth might have turned tail and switched sides thus remains an allegorical possibility. In the wake of 9/11, the Neo-Cons who have fueled the policies of the current president would have it that the Jews – in the figure of the state of Israel and its American acolytes – have once again been targeted by Arabs who now play the role of Nazis. In a recent roundtable at the New Yorker Festival of Books, the novelist Cynthia Ozick repeated the canard of Arabs as modern-day Nazis to the Turkish novelist Orhan Pamuk who dismissed the comparison; Pamuk, correctly, insisted that the German Nazis and the Islamic fundamentalists have been fueled by very different views of the world and that Anti-Semitism in the two contexts could not be equated.

But the idea has been repeated in many reviews of *The Plot Against America* that Roth has now changed sides and has written an allegory of “Old” Anti-Semitism that is a harbinger for the “New” Anti-Semitism.

In my view this reading could not be farther from the truth.

It is totally unnecessary to have Philip Roth become something that he never was and has not now become just to reinforce the painfully pathetic ideology that now permeates the Jewish community; a community that in so many ways has betrayed the legacy of its American past.

In this novel Roth valorizes the strength and the commitment of his parents and their generation. He excoriates the betrayal of Liberal principles by those like Bengelsdorf and the others who make common cause with the Anti-Semites. In my reading of Roth’s allegory it may be argued that the Jews gravitate towards their enemies – Anti-Semites like Lindbergh – in order to reap the benefits of assimilation rather than standing firmly on principle.

From recent public pronouncements and his past record we know that Roth harbors an antipathy to the current president and his administration. The liberal values that permeated Newark’s Jewish community are effectively antithetical to the ideas that now guide the Jewish Neo-Cons. Roth’s prose is at its most luminescent when he discusses FDR and Fiorello La Guardia and the manner in which they promoted the values of liberalism and hope among the Jews and other minorities. Such Liberalism has become anathema within the Jewish community at present; a community that worries more about Israel than America.

The allegory of *The Plot Against America* can thus be seen as a covert attack upon the current degeneration of the American Jewish community against the very bedrock values that once made it such an important and vigorous part of civic discourse in this country. With the decisive Jewish move to the Right we see the abandonment of the values of Roth’s Newark; his book speaks in romantic and idealistic terms about the fight against a real and not imagined Anti-Semitism. The bunker mentality of the Jewish community at present is an affront to the memory of those Jews who really had to deal with racism. Roth serves to heighten that sense of Anti-Semitism by rewriting history and yet that heightening appears to teach us that the values of the past – the values of tolerance and compassion and liberalism – are, in comparison with the pathological and violent paranoia of the present, truly ideals worth fighting for.

One might see Rabbi Bengelsdorf as pre-figuring the many Bushite Jews who haunt the White House these days and who hold the president’s coat-tails. Roth allegorically presents these sycophants as decrepit figures – constantly extolling the virtues of Christianity and the need for Jews – as we see in the execrable pronouncements of idiotic self-hating Jews like David Horowitz, Dennis Prager and Michael Medved – to make common cause with the Christian Right.

In point of fact, it is clear to me that *The Plot Against America* is a fierce diatribe against the Jewish abandonment of Liberal values.

A cousin of mine recently raised the question of what happened to liberal Jews of the recent past. Where, he asked, have the progressive Jews like Philip Roth, Leonard Bernstein and Albert Einstein gone? While once Jews marched for civil rights, it is now Jews who seek to help the white racist majority of Bushites help roll back the fight for equality and civil rights. The relation between this Jewish reactionary behavior is linked as well to the emergence of Israel as a racist ethnocentric state of Ashkenazi Aryans. This too has been a subject of Roth's fiction in books like *The Counterlife* and *Operation Shylock*.

The answer to my cousin's trenchant and important question might be found in the Proustian musings of the current edition of Philip Roth.

Roth has turned his lens back toward the past – his past, our American Jewish past – and found Jewish saints and heroes who stood against intolerance and injustice. The allegory that I have unearthed in this brilliant novel teaches us that we need to retreat to the past in order to understand the present and its ills. From humility and charity Jews have moved towards arrogance and pomposity. From tolerance and humanism Jews have moved towards ethnocentrism and parochialism.

The Plot Against America is a major work of popular literature that is brilliantly written and crafted. Roth is perhaps the greatest American writer alive; a writer whose artistic vision is, as he has reminded us, of a piece with the great American authors of our collective national past. His characters are fully realized and humanely drawn. The novel is an accessible work of creative literary imagination that is a supreme act of devotion to the ideals of America and the promotion of an alternative patriotism to the jingoistic ravings of the current nativists.

The Plot Against America is another chapter in Philip Roth's archaeology of the Jewish sojourn in this great country; a country whose greatness has recently been sold to the highest bidder by venal politicians who, like Lindbergh and his gang, refused to accept the pluralistic humanist vision of Jefferson, Madison, Hamilton and the rest of the Founding Fathers. The book is a paean to the greatness of the American ideal of the noble vision of Man that is enshrined in the Holy Scriptures of the American republic; the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution and the Bill of Rights.

Roth provides us with a vigorous reminder – at a time when we are so sorely in need of such a reminder – of what this great country once represented – and can still represent if we believe in its ideals of tolerance and justice. With the ideals of tolerance and justice currently in eclipse, it is up to us to re-imagine with Roth an America that destroyed those ideals so that we can better appreciate the achievement of America and what its values have given to our civilization.

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